

## Autumnal Alteration

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Summary: Change comes upon everyone and everything. Sometimes it is gradual, other times it's very sudden. Hiccup's death and spirit-birth is a little bit of both, but it's nothing he can't handle. He was, after all, the first Viking ever to ride a Dragon.

RotBD: Seasonal Spirits: one-shot 1 of 4. HttyD canon-compliant.

Mentions of Hiccup/Astrid, character deaths.

## Autumnal Alteration

**\*\*A/N: \*\***Okay, I'm biting: this is the first one-shot of four detailing how the non-RotG three of the Big Four might become Seasonal Spirits (and, eventually, meet Jack Frost) while maintaining the canon of their worlds as is known to me at this point. They will be written in the order of their creation; Hiccup was born as a Seasonal spirit first of the batch, thus his story comes first.

A sketch of him, Merida, and Rapunzel in updated garb as spirits (c. RotG time period) can be found in my DA gallery. My username is exactly the same as it is here. Format is USERNAME dot DEVIANTART dot COM.

Keep your eyes out for Merida: she'll be up next.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Autumnal Alteration<strong>

Hiccup wasn't particularly surprised when he woke up invisible. Not that he knew it right away; in fact, it wasn't until he had dressed, donned his artificial leg, and seized the special cane he had crafted years ago to hobble out of his room that he realized nobody could see him. \_That\_ was when he remained strangely unaffected, only rolling his eyes when nobody in the main area of the house returned his morning greeting and edging slightly out of the way before his littlest granddaughter could run through his leg. Again.

"Oh, nobody mind me, I'm only \_family\_ after all," he grouched, limping towards the hearth. Of course, being invisible and intangible also seemed to make him inaudible; though his order had been all sarcasm, nobody minded him in the least.

At least he could still feel warmth, he thought, propping the cane against his good leg and holding his hands out above the fire that crackled against the chill of an early pre-winter morning. Standing beside the dancing flames was soothing; he could all but see the aches and pains of seven long, hard decades of life melting away from his joints.

Hiccup was so engrossed by the very pleasurable fire in the hearth that he didn't notice his youngest granddaughter slipping into his bedroom until she wailed aloud.

"\_Mooom! Daaaad! Grampa's gone again!\_"

He chuckled. "No, I'm right here, just like every other time."

And just like every other time this happened, he was completely and utterly ignored, even as his daughter-in-law shoved the fish she had been preparing for breakfast into her husband's hands and charged into the back room to see the evidence of his disappearance herself.

"Reminds me of Astrid," Hiccup mused aloud, glancing at his bewildered son. "No wonder I always liked her so much."

The middle-aged woman came bustling back out, looking stern. Hiccup couldn't help but grin a little; the first few times this had happened she'd been more confused than angry. Lately she had started blaming him for the disappearances, assuming he had deliberately snuck off without a word to anyone and ignoring any protest he made. Eventually he learned to sit through her tirades nodding and smiling, a tactic that forced her to back off as she could only conclude that the elderly ex-chief of Berk had finally gone just slightly senile, something a world of scolding couldn't fix.

"Well, his leg is gone, as is his cane. I swear, Swifteye, I am \_this close\_ to just tying the man to his bed. If he wasn't your father..."

She stalked off out the back door, presumably to check on Toothless in the dragon stable. He tended to go invisible at the same times as Hiccup, engendering the belief that the two of them were suddenly in the habit of slinking off to wander the island where nobody could find them.

"Still reminded of Astrid," Hiccup declared, "but not liking her so much anymore. What is it with us and pushy shield maidens, Swift?"

His son gave no indication he had heard, having returned to glancing uncertainly between the half-prepared fish still in his hands and the back door of the house, where his wife was searching the frosted grass in vain for the very distinctive tracks of her father-in-law.

"Not that your mother was always pushy, of course. It depended on the situation. Once you kids came along, especially. She could be mellow, practically sweet, one moment, and a rampant Monstrous Nightmare the next. Odin help any soul that dared threaten you."

Swifteye shook his head abruptly and abandoned the fish on the table, giving orders to young Arrowhead to guard the food from the household's twin Terrors, Sputter and Snort. He then marched out the front door to make sure Hiccup hadn't gone that way.

"Still here!" Hiccup called after his son. The door shut with a smart snap. "Oh well. I suppose I'll pop back into view eventually."

And with that, Hiccup lowered himself into his customary chair with significantly more ease than had become usual, and set to pondering his situation.

It was certainly nothing he'd ever heard of before, and being an esteemed combination of former chief, notably clever, and one of the oldest individuals still alive on Berk, he'd heard (and retained) more than most. The only conclusion he ever arrived at was that it was some bizarre joke the gods were having at his expense, though even that failed to satisfy him; their jokes tended to run on far grander schemes than turning an elderly ex-chieftain of a small Viking tribe invisible for brief spans of time over the run of a month.

No, there had to be something else to it. Something that he, ironically, wasn't seeing. And to his displeasure, there was only one person he knew of who had the kind of sight he lacked.

Very reluctantly, Hiccup levered himself back up out of his seat. He'd been putting this off for over a week, ever since he'd noticed that his disappearances were growing both more frequent and more extensive by the day. Still, he'd been somewhat intending to take care of the matter once and for all that very morning, so there was nothing for it but to head out once Swifteye opened the door back up and hope (or not) that he'd be visible again by the time he reached his destination.

It was high time he consulted the Elder.

\* \* \*

><p>Half a century had wrought its changes on Berk, and had Hiccup not been there for every decade of it he might hardly have recognized the village of his youth. The buildings were constructed in much the same architectural style â€" the heavily sloped roofs and thick beams had always served the Vikings well in both sloughing off snow and withstanding the weight of a perched dragon, and why fix what wasn't broken? â€" but there were more of them now, not to mention clear differences in age between the long-established homes and those just built. No more dragon attacks tended to mean fewer house fires and less need to constantly reconstruct entire streets all at once.<p>

The faces on said streets had also changed. Vikings who were young in Hiccup's youth were fully-grown, even elderly now, and Vikings who were already old...well. They were dead.

Unfortunately, this included the Gythja who had seen something more in Hiccup's dragon training victories, something everyone else had missed at the time, and had selected him, not to kill a dragon, but to save the village. She had been wily that way, a little cryptic and riddling in her knowledge of the gods and the worlds beyond men, but Hiccup had always felt that she was one to respect and one to seek for answers.

She passed not long into Hiccup's adulthood, and was then replaced by her successor, a still-young woman only nine years older than Hiccup himself; hardly an elder at the time, but she was Gythja now, and she would age into the role she had been trained for since her own youth.

Unfortunately, this new Gythja and the then-upcoming Chief were hardly fond of one another. Amicable enough in public, yes, and very capable of maintaining the professional relationship required between the leader of the village and the one who brought their needs and questions before the gods, but never fond. It probably didn't help that she had grown up with the knowledge that she was the future Gythja, while Hiccup was the Useless boy who would, most likely, be passed over for chieftainhood, if he wasn't killed by a dragon or his own ineptitude before that time came. Hiccup, of course, had never cared for her arrogant manners.

Fond certainly wasn't the word, nor was friendly.

Which was why Hiccup was slightly perturbed when the Elder (who, with stringy white hair and a heavily wrinkled face, now fully looked her part) opened her door, took one look at him, and burst out with the gleeful laughter of one who has just deduced the answer of a particularly tricky riddle.

"So that's what it meant!"

"I take it you know why I'm here, and what's going on?"

"Of course I do. I just needed this last piece to work it all out. Better come inside; I haven't many visitors, but if any do come by the last thing I need is to be seen talking to air, Gythja or no!"

"Talking to air?" Hiccup repeated, stepping in with a scowl. "You're talking to me!"

"And you're invisible. Well, mostly. I can see you, being Gythja and trained for similar things, and I expect even young Ashsprout could make you out as well, at least until tonight; her training is far from complete at this stage."

Hiccup passed over the mentions of his continued invisibility (this made at least half an hour, which was about one quarter of his record time, and it might have been longer yet if he'd popped out of vision while he slept) in favor of pursuing another tantalizing point.

"Why, what's tonight?"

"A full moon. Should be lovely and bright, no cloud cover like last

night had. Very conducive conditions."

She canted him a sly look, an expression which clearly mocked, "\_I know something that you don't."\_

"Withholding information and being deliberately vague might seem like wisdom to most, but I know better. Quit spinning it up."

The Gythja's face twisted in sudden annoyance.

"Let's see you work it out yourself then, Hiccup the \_Clever\_."

"I hardly have the same information as you do!" Hiccup retorted. "Any solution I come up with could well fall short due to some key point I'm not privy to because you're sitting on it for your own amusement!"

"You want information? Here's information: \_you're dying\_."

The words dropped to the floor, drawing down a blanket of silence in the cramped home.

"Thank you for summing that up," Hiccup finally managed in his customary dry tone. "I don't suppose I'll have time to return home and tell the kids to start arrangements? Or am I more likely to drop in the street on my way there?"

"Oh, you won't be dropping anywhere anytime soon, I'll tell you that much," the Gythja stated, once again cryptic and sly. "In fact..."

With a sudden speed belied by her aged appearance, she scooped up a small looking glass from a nearby tabletop and whipped it at Hiccup's chest. He knew he wouldn't catch it in time, his reflexes and dexterity having diminished especially quickly during the last five years alone, but still he jerked his hand before his chest on impulse...

And he caught the mirror.

And there was something \_wrong\_ with his hand, now that he looked at it. \_Both\_ of his hands, in fact.

The wrinkles were gone.

The skin was smooth, elastic, and evenly colored, as it had been in his youth. Staring at them, Hiccup was struck by the strange thought that these were the hands of a stranger, inexplicably stuck to his body without his will or knowledge. Following this thought was a bizarre, impossible suspicion, and he flipped the mirror around to see his face.

Shocked green eyes stared back at him from the surface of the glass, set in a young adult's face. His hair was no longer balding-thin and white but full and auburn, the short patches of facial hair upon his chin the same shade. He opened his mouth and poked about it with his tongue; all his teeth were there again, leaving none of the gaps he had become accustomed to when he'd lost a molar here to toothache or a molar there to a particularly hard hit in the mouth in a building accident.

"I'm de-aging," Hiccup said aloud, marveling now that he hadn't before noticed his voice gradually losing its elderly rasp, or the increased strength and ease with which his lungs drew air for speech, "yet you say I'm dying. The full moon is somehow involved, as well as what you call conducive conditions. I've been going invisible at intervals all month â€" approximately since the last full moon, in fact."

He watched his eyebrows draw together in the looking glass, creating a familiar furrow which had etched a faint, permanent crease in his brow â€" a crease which had surely been present just an hour ago, at least, but had been smoothed away entirely by these odd events.

"I'm not becoming a draugr?"

The Gythja raised a pointed eyebrow.

"No, I know that doesn't make sense. I'm dying, not dead, and the other signs are also all wrong...I'm still missing something."

"Oh, you're taking too long," the Gythja sighed, sounding very put upon even though she wasn't the one currently questioning her very existence. "I suppose I must explain the lot of it to you. You know a little of the gods, of course; every child on Berk knows a little. Yet there are also spirits of sorts, beings of power over the natural world and aspects of humanity. They are lower than gods, yet more immediate, and are often formed from the souls of humans who fulfilled a needed role in an exceptional way during their life. They cannot be seen by most, or heard, or touched. These things are well-known to the Gythja, as we are trained to be open to the greater workings of the world, and of the gods. A month ago, my divining told me to watch for change moving from Berk to the spirit world. I see now that this referred to you. Congratulations, Hiccup: you're dying, and so you're changing."

Hiccup was, for the first time in years, well and truly flabbergasted.

"That's all I know," the Gythja informed him briskly, taking the mirror from his lax hand before he could drop the precious thing and turning him around towards the door. "And right now, there's a friend outside waiting for you and a couple generations of family growing increasingly worried about your whereabouts. Besides, I'm quite busy; got plenty to do, after all, still being Gythja!"

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless was the friend the Gythja referred to, and like Hiccup, he was looking as young and spry and dark-scaled as he had in their prime. He purred a very cheerful greeting, wiggling his entire body about in lithe contortions and grinning gummily as he did so, as though saying to Hiccup, "<em>look what I can do again!<em>"

The sight encouraged Hiccup somewhat; he still had very little idea what to think of the whole dying-spirit-change thing the Gythja had abruptly dumped on him, but at least Toothless' condition indicated that he would hardly be going into it completely alone.

"Come on, bud. Let's walk."

Hiccup walked; Toothless bounded. It all came down to the very thing Hiccup wanted, however: a chance to stretch his newly young-again legs, to explore the village again without needing to lean on his cane or stop to catch his breath, and, of course, an outing with his oldest friend. It didn't matter that nobody paused to greet the two of them, or that had they been tangible they would have caused at least half a dozen collisions, some of them quite large and one involving five people, a Deadly Nadder, several sheep, and a bread cart (it was a very near miss even without factoring in the currently-intangible Night Fury and ex-chief). In fact, in a very short time Hiccup came to find this new freedom of body and soul enjoyable, and he and Toothless made a game of playing chicken with traffic by the wharf, both delighting in their newly-retained strength.

By noon, however, they were tired and even growing hungry; half an hour later they were dragging themselves back up the hills and walkways towards the Chief's house, the familiar old aches and pains returning to their bodies and slowing their movements.

"Suppose we're visible yet?" Hiccup asked Toothless. The dragon grunted and stretched a wing, popping a couple of stiffening joints.

"Yeah, it probably doesn't matter much. We will be when we will be, and we'll know it when the kids start yelling."

The dragon flicked him a look of haughty reproach, as though implying it was all Hiccup's own fault for spawning offspring in the first place. Hiccup hacked a brief laugh and shoved Toothless' shoulder lightly, hobbling up one step at a time with the aid of his cane.

His hands were wrinkled again.

"That was fun," he observed suddenly, and Toothless flicked a grey-splotched ear in his direction. "Being young again. I miss it already. Thing is, I expect it'll come with a price â€" something bigger than dying, anyhow. Everybody dies. I've been half-expecting myself it since Astrid..."

Hiccup trailed off into a dry cough, gathered himself, and moved slowly up a few more steps.

"Yes. Well. The new Gythja did say something about being invisible to everyone except a few. I don't know, can we handle her being practically our only human contact?"

Toothless snorted and nosed Hiccup's side.

"You're right. We'll have each other. That is something."

They paused at the base of the final hill, staring up at the old structure crowning it. It had grown in the past decades, with a dragon-sized stable built at the back where there had once only been grass and trees.

"I've done all I can for them," Hiccup said softly, turning his head so his gaze swept the entire village. "All of them. Their lives are

in their hands now. It's why I stepped down as chief all that time ago. Yes," he decided with a small nod, "it's their turn. It's time."

"Time for \_what\_?" snapped a voice at Hiccup's back. He turned slowly to see a well-built Viking woman glaring down at him with her fists planted firmly on her hips. She looked ready to murder him...or to make good her earlier threats at least. Faced with this, Hiccup did the only thing he possibly could.

He beamed at her.

"Fletching! Hello, Fletch, how are you? Doing well? You look well. How's my son? I've not talked to him yet this morning, not an actual conversation, I may have been up early, how is everything?"

"Prattling doesn't work on me anymore."

"Prattling? What prattling? I wasn't prattling; I was genuinely curious."

"Where have you been?"

"On a walk. With Toothless." Hiccup indicated the dragon at his side as though his presence wasn't immediately obvious. The dragon gave Hiccup's daughter-in-law his most innocent expression.

"All morning?" she demanded.

"Well, I don't know if it was..."

She indicated the sky and Hiccup peered up dutifully, shading his eyes with one hand and humming as though he hadn't before noticed the position of the sun.

"Oh. It was. That explains why I'm so hungry."

Fletching made a noise that could only be described as exasperated and threw her arms up at her sides.

"All right, I got it, you need your food. Toothless too, I wager. Crazy as a bag of Terrors, you two, I swear, someday I'll...confiscate that leg of yours."

"Sputter and Snort love me too much," Hiccup informed her blithely, continuing his journey up the stairs with her gentle-for-a-ticked-off-Viking-woman support. "They'll do anything I ask, even seek and retrieve a fake leg."

"And don't I know it. Why d'you think I've not tried it yet? I'm not without a mind."

"I know," Hiccup said, sobering again. "I know. And now Swifteye has you to take care of him. And Firlimb has Fishhook, and Rustblade has Hazelfist, and you all have your own children to mind. I'm not needed anymore."

Fletching faltered for a moment, then dragged him on toward the door with greater vigor.



"Stop talking crazy. Of course you're needed."

"No. No, not really. And I'm glad of it. I'm glad."

Hiccup allowed Fletch to manhandle him into the house, sit him down in his chair with stern orders not to move a muscle from that spot, and march off again to call off whatever family-and-friends search party they had managed to organize in the hours of Hiccup's disappearance. He then endured an interrogation from his three children over lunch, an interrogation he spent being deliberately vague and cheerful before requesting a big family dinner that evening.

Thanks in part to his current mindset and many, many years of leading a village of bullheaded Vikings, the request came across more as an order. It was, of course, obeyed as one. Whether he was suspected to be going senile or no, one did not refuse Hiccup the Clever, Berk's first Dragon Rider and Slayer of the Red Death, when his tone became that of a chief; anything he said or asked in such a voice was generally very important.

Not that any of them knew why it was important. By the end of the night Hiccup thought that his only daughter, Firlimb, might have begun to suspect something was up, but she swallowed the inquisitive nature she had inherited from him, beating it down with the right-here-right-now Viking practicality Astrid had given her. Hiccup's thoughts and reasons for the impromptu extended family time went entirely unquestioned.

Besides, no Viking had ever achieved subtlety the way Hiccup had over the years. In the midst of sharing family news and reminiscences, he made sure to give each and every one of his children and grandchildren a few words of love and pride, reminders and gentle admonishments, his last crumbs of advice wrapped up in gestures of affection. These would only later be recognized as his final farewells, as Hiccup intended.

Between the Gythja's hints and a gut feeling which grew stronger and stronger as time passed and the moon emerged in the darkening sky, Hiccup believed that none of them would ever see him, or Toothless, again.

Sure enough, hours after Hiccup returned to his old house with Swifteye's family, he awoke suddenly in the darkness of his room with a thought not his own echoing in his mind: it is time.

Fumbling through the pitch-black of his room, Hiccup found his prosthetic leg and cane by touch, strapping the former on and dressing himself in that day's tunic and furs once more. All the while he felt as though he were thrumming with energy, and when he rubbed his hands over his face he felt skin as smooth as it had been that morning — as smooth as it had been decades ago.

Wrestling now with a bizarre and almost guilty mixture of excitement and a pang of sorrow, Hiccup snuck outside and found himself bathed by the brilliant light of the full moon. It seemed to him that the silver disc hung closer to earth than usual, it was so large and luminous. It beckoned, almost whispering, but he turned away.

There was one more thing left to do.

Moving quickly and fairly quietly, Hiccup hurried over to the dragon stables and strode into the largest and most comfortable room within.

Toothless waited for him, wide awake and equally youthful in appearance.

"You ready for this, bud?" Hiccup whispered, more out of habit than true necessity; he had the feeling that he could sing and shout at the top of his restored lungs, and not a wing would twitch in the long, warm shelter. Toothless cooed and butted his head into Hiccup's stomach, wiggling around with a massive grin.

His tack was old now, but it had been kept well-oiled, clean and dry and in good repair out of respect, similar in a way to the care paid to old family shields and battle-axes. If not for that saddle and tailfin, Toothless and Hiccup would never have brought peace between dragons and Vikings, and that alone afforded it honor despite the general lack of sharp edges for hacking and slashing.

Hiccup saddled Toothless and checked the tailfin's connections and responsiveness with sure, steady hands. It wasn't long before Night Fury and Rider were up in the air, soaring under the moon and laughing as they pulled stunts they hadn't dared to in years. Somersaults, backflips, barrel rolls, screaming dives they pulled out of only in the nick of time...and then, in the midst of a relaxing glide, the air around them seemed to grow still in a single crystalline moment.

\_Hiccup Haddock,\_ sighed a voice in Hiccup's mind. Toothless twitched, as though he had also been addressed. The two held their breath, facing the glowing moon, but no more words came; only a sense of acknowledgement and pride, a fleeting feeling of support and congratulations, like that imparted by a warm hand patting one's back after a hard-won or well-handled situation.

The moment passed, the air loosened its hold, and in accord with one another, Toothless and Hiccup worked wings and tailfins to glide out over the forests of Raven's Point, coming to a gentle rest in the cove where their friendship began.

"What now?" Hiccup wondered, looking upwards at the bright moon as though addressing the question there. There was no answer, only a faint breath of wind rustling the trees and playing with Hiccup's auburn hair and the heavy grey fur of his cloak.

"There must be something I have to do," Hiccup pressed, all the levity of his returned youth faded now, "some task the gods wish me to perform. Why else would I die, but remain? If I were to be rewarded or punished for my life, there are other realms, other fates."

Silence reigned in the cove.

Hiccup sighed and dismounted, stretching his limbs and testing his balance. His cane he slung over one shoulder, hefting its familiar weight and resisting the ingrained habit of leaning on it as he walked.

"Well, assuming we won't change back in a few hours, and assuming what the Gythja said was true, we're spirits now," Hiccup said, addressing Toothless as the dragon moved to take a drink out of the night-dark pond. "What should we do first?"

The dragon glanced at him, shrugged, and continued to scoop water up into his wide mouth.

"We're not needed here anymore; I made sure of it. And I don't really want to watch everybody realize we're gone in the morning and never be able to find us again."

Hiccup had said his farewells, though his family might not have grasped them as such just yet. It would be easier to just let go and fly away now than to watch the agony of their gradual understanding; who would want to watch his own family mourn at his funeral?

He backed up against a nearby tree, glanced up at the moon again, and lifted his cane horizontally in front of him, one hand lightly gripping the leather-wrapped length below the curved metal handrest, the other holding the straight wooden shaft of the tool. For several seconds he regarded the thing he had crafted back when his hair had begun to grow silver and his walk a touch less steady. Then, with a firm twist of the band of metal just below the handle, a hidden latch clicked and Hiccup half-drew the long, slender blade hidden within the strong, hollow length of wood.

He grinned wryly at the memories that one motion brought. He had never been a conventional Viking; forging a blade narrower and lighter than the norm and then hiding it in an innocuous walking stick was perhaps the least of his irregularities, yet it was one which had saved his life more than once as various enemies had looked on him as a feeble, infirm, and unarmed man only to regret their assumptions.

Assume nothing; be open to anything was the lesson Hiccup had taught his tribe throughout his life, most often through his own actions. He thought perhaps he should do the same now.

He shouldn't assume that he was permanently a spirit, even though he very strongly felt this was so, until he had some kind of proof. Neither should he assume that he was meant for some greater task or purpose. He hadn't died in battle, which may well have exempted him from Valhalla, but perhaps some of his braver actions and grander victories in life had also excluded him from the monotony of Hel's realm. Perhaps spirithood was simply the lot of those who distinguished themselves in life, yet managed to survive everything and die peacefully against all odds.

Hiccup couldn't say; he was no Gythja, and frankly had little to no desire to seek her out for more answers. He would rather approach this new situation in much the way he had once approached a downed dragon: with a great deal of hope, a pinch of faith, and no small amount of courage.

He shoved the sword back into its disguised sheath and locked it in place.

"Come on, Toothless; let's fly."

If he didn't return to normal, to life, before noon the next day, he would treat his condition as permanent. Until he was given a clear task, they would explore the world. He would, of course, stay close to Berk as he didn't want to outright abandon his family, but he had done his greatest duties as a father: he had loved and looked out for them until they could care for themselves, until they had their own children to love and look out for. Perhaps it really was time for each of them to let go.

As Hiccup pushed himself off of the tree, however, the wind rustled the branches once more. Several curled brown leaves dropped directly before his face, brushing his nose and causing him to look up in wonder, for the tree's leaves had still been green and yellow and heartily shaped when they had arrived in the cove.

Now they were brown and trembling on their stalks.

"Wait," Hiccup murmured, pressing a hand to the tree trunk in thought. The bark was rough under his palm, hard and still as ever, yet when he thought on it he imagined he could feel a faint and steady thrumming, like the slow heartbeat and purring breath of a dozing dragon. As he watched, several more leaves detached and spun away in the breeze.

Struck by a sudden thought, a "\_what if" \_suspicion that pressed him to test his newfound hypothesis, Hiccup turned and sought out yet another tree of the non-coniferous sort. They were somewhat rare on Berk, given the wintry weather, but soon enough he spotted one and rushed for it, peering up at the dark and healthy leaves. Toothless followed him in bemusement, no doubt wondering why they weren't already in the air; Hiccup had mentioned flight, after all.

"Wait, Toothless, I need to see..."

Hiccup pressed a hand to the trunk and tried to capture that humming sensation in the wood again. Sure enough, there it was, save stronger, more vibrant, less like a sleeping dragon and more like one humming in long, steady flight. And then, as he listened, the hum slowed and receded, fading away like the cries of a child being lulled gently to sleep.

Above him, the leaves faded from dark green to pale gold, color spreading and changing in blotches all over the crown. Hiccup released the tree and backed away, and still it faded toward the sleep of winter, leaves now curling up and preparing to fall.

"Is that what we're meant to do?" Hiccup wondered aloud. "Change the trees, put them to sleep?"

Toothless nosed up under Hiccup's elbow. The darkness was deep, but the eastern sky was growing grey; within a couple of hours, the sun would rise.

"This would be easier with some instructions or a guide, you know."

He mounted Toothless easily, clipped his prosthetic in place, and paused for a brief moment in thought.

"Then again, I could have said the same about befriending dragons and getting us into the air...and I'd say that turned out all right in the end. Wouldn't you, bud?"

Toothless snorted and gave Hiccup a look.

"Right, right. I'm on it."

The fin clicked into position; the dragon rocketed into the sky. On his back was a boy, a boy who had once been an old man and was now a Spirit, an inhabitant of a world wider than his imagination had ever allowed himself to guess, though soon enough he would know.

And as he had been throughout his life, Hiccup the Clever, Spirit of Autumn, would be the carrier and instigator of Change.

End  
file.